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Richard Bissell Takes the Rap

Finger of Blame Too Easily Pointed
At One Involved in Cuban Fiasco

Twice in a long career of unselfish and courageous service to his country the name of Richard Bissell has been in the headlines.

The first time was last spring, in the aftermath of the patriots' invasion of Castro-Communist Cuba. On that occasion kind friends and associates in government, with those eager and girlishly gossipy leaks to certain sympathetic correspondents which typify a sort of civil servant who is strong most of all in the sterling quality of self-preservation, most kindly pointed the finger at Richard Bissell.

No sooner had the 'great search of "Who done it?" begun over the corpse of the lost action than there began to appear curious pieces in the papers, springing as from nowhere, in which the name "Bissell" led all the rest. What on earth had been wrong with the planning? Well, whatever it was, it was Bissell who was to blame. It was Bissell who had unwisely advised the administration to enter this hapless enterprise—and, of course, it was also pointed out that those who leaked this

deathless information were themselves wholly blameless. They, of course, had opposed it all along.

From their standpoint the fall guy was well chosen. For Richard Bissell, apart from the natural personal reserve of a desperately shy man, was an old-fashioned professional in government who knew that civil servants at his level were supposed to keep their minds open and their mouths shut. They were intended to be advisers to superiors, not press contact men for themselves.

Moreover, Bissell's own particular job enjoined silence upon him in a special way. For he was a high—and up to this point a highly anonymous—official doing the most hush-hush sort of work in the Central Intelligence Agency. In a word, he would not have defended himself by counter-leak, if he could, being the kind of man he is, and he could not have even if he would.

John F. Kennedy himself sought so many scapegoats for the failure in Cuba, rightly realizing that this action had been approved by the President of the United States and that the responsibility of that person can be shared by no one. Lesser people within the administration, however, were not so generous. Scapegoats had to be found; and so Bissell was there to fill the bill.

Thus, recently, his resignation was announced—and along with this, his appointment as executive vice president of the Institute for Defense Analyses, a university-supported group which is seeking to assist this Government in the cold war.

My small salute to the departing Richard Bissell is not intended to say that he did not make mistakes in his recommendations for the Cuban action. Nor is it intended to suggest even that in the hard, tough game of public affairs he should not have had to pay the price of error.

It is intended, however, to pay a left-handed compliment to the highly effective nature of the whispering campaign, by leak which other bureaucrats so gladly and quickly loosed against the one man who had no means—or taste—to answer back.

And, finally, it is intended to raise a most melancholy point: Bissell, whatever his mistakes, was one bureaucrat who was repeatedly willing to risk mistakes—to risk his whole future, as in Cuba—in order actually to do something. Bureaucracy tends to play it safe, and let George do it—and take the rap. Bissell played it dangerous, and let Richard do it—and take the rap.

It hardly overstates the matter, does it, to suggest that it seems a pity that when the ghost does walk among the bureaucrats, handing out the spectral blue slips of dismissal, it walks so often among the men of decision, and of courage—and of taste?

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